

Responses to Relationship Problems: Unique Effects of Self-Esteem, Compassionate Goals, and  
Self-Image Goals.

Undergraduate Honors Research Thesis

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by

Courtney L. Cleminshaw

The Ohio State University

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Project Advisor: Dr. Jennifer Crocker, Department of Psychology

### Abstract

Self-esteem and motivational goals shape relationships over time (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). People high in self-esteem believe that they are worthy relationship partners and trust in their partners' regard for them. Those high in compassionate goals wish to be a supportive and constructive force in relationships, feel a greater responsibility to others, and tend to view their relationships as non-zero-sum (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Those high in self-image goals wish to construct and defend a desirable public image of themselves and tend to view relationships as zero-sum (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). The present study examines self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals in the context of current romantic relationships and had two main aims. First, we examined the effects of self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals on both constructive approaches to problems and defensive responses to conflict. Second, we analyzed whether nonzero-sum beliefs accounted for these associations. We predicted that compassionate and self-image goals would explain unique variance in constructive approaches to problems and defensive responses to conflict distinct from self-esteem and that nonzero-sum beliefs would account for these effects. Analysis revealed that self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals each have unique indirect effects on both defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems through nonzero-sum beliefs, as well as unique direct effects on defensive responses and constructive approaches that are not explained by nonzero-sum beliefs.

## Responses to Relationship Problems: Unique Effects of Self-Esteem, Compassionate Goals, and Self-Image Goals.

Many people believe that being a part of a romantic relationship will lead to their overall happiness. And in fact, high quality close relationships, or ongoing interactions that involve affectively strong bonds between people (Aron 2003), have been associated with constructs such as trust, relationship closeness, partner forgiveness, accommodation, and willingness to sacrifice (Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2009). But not everyone has high quality relationships. People low in self-esteem, in particular, show counterproductive tendencies and behaviors that undermine their relationship quality (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 2000). Self-esteem also shapes interpersonal goals; low self-esteem people tend to be higher in self-image goals and be more concerned about managing the impressions their relationship partners have of them, whereas higher self-esteem people tend to be higher in compassionate goals and be more concerned about being supportive and constructive of their relationship partners (Lemay & Clark 2009). There is growing literature on both self-esteem and compassionate and self-image goals, including their effects on relationships and how they may be related. Murray, Holmes, and MacDonald (1998) found that people who valued the goal of connectedness more highly than the goal of minimizing rejection were more likely to experience satisfying relationships. But, research has failed to examine whether self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals are measuring the same or separate effects on relationship domains. If self-esteem shapes interpersonal goals, will self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals explain unique aspects of outcomes such as responses to relationship problems?

### **Self-Esteem and Close Relationships**

Self-esteem refers to an individual's favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self

(Rosenberg, 1965). Baldwin (1992) argued that positive models of the self play a critical role in relationship well-being. Self-esteem has serious consequences for relationships; low self-esteem predicts decreased relationship stability (Hendrick, Hendrick & Adler, 1988) and satisfaction (Voss, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 1999).

Maintaining satisfying and committed relationships can be a challenge for people with low self-esteem. Low self-esteem people (LSE) respond to heightened self-doubt with increased doubt about their partner, and even negative or tarnished impressions of their partner (Murray et al., 1998). The regulation of relationship perceptions suggests that people find value in their partner only when they perceive that their partner finds value in them (Murray et al. 1998). For LSEs, failure such as professional criticism can lead to the projection of self-doubts onto a partner and an uncertainty of a partner's affections. On the other hand, when faced with criticism or other failure, high self-esteem people (HSE) respond by using a partner's positive regard as a means of self-affirmation.

Unfortunately, LSEs also experience "cognitive-affective crossfire" (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987), in which overly positive feedback from a partner is discounted, even though LSEs crave and desire this feedback (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). In addition, Marigold, Holmes, and Ross (2010) found that security is crucial for LSEs to feel comfortable risking rejection to build closeness with a partner. Yet, while security and high responsiveness from their partners are important to LSEs, LSE's insecurities may hinder them from providing these very things for their partner. Lemay and Clark (2009) found that LSEs, but not HSEs, had lower motivation to care for their partners' needs when they felt that they shared certain flaws, and also when they focused on similarities between themselves and a socially devalued partner.

Self-esteem may also affect attachment styles in adult relationships. Hazan and Shaver

(1987) argued that adult relationships exhibit attachment styles, such as anxious and avoidant, similar to those seen in childhood. They described anxiety as worry about being rejected or abandoned, and doubt about whether close others are available and responsive. Avoidance reflects discomfort with dependency, intimacy, and closeness. HSEs tend to be securely attached, and LSEs experience more attachment-related anxiety and avoidance (Bringle & Bagby, 1992).

LSEs have higher rejection sensitivity, and underestimate how highly they are regarded by others (Downey & Feldman, 1986). Consequently, they often assume that relationship conflict will cause their partner to see flaws within them (Bellavia & Murray, 2003). In contrast, HSEs tend to engage in more adaptive and supportive behaviors with partners (Collins & Feeney, 2000). People with anxious attachment styles tend to interpret partner's behavior during conflict as overly harsh or defensive (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996, as cited in Murray et al. 1998). And, because LSEs are less confident in their self-identity than HSEs, they consequently treat incoming information as self-diagnostic (Murray et al., 1998). Similar patterns have been studied in the domain of contingent self-esteem. DeHart, Pelham, and Murray (2004) found that implicit evaluations of partners were highly contingent on the current state of a romantic relationship for LSEs, but implicit evaluations of partners by HSEs were not contingent on how things were going in the relationship. However, increasing perceived security in relationships for LSEs can lead to more HSE-like behavior and may lead to greater satisfaction, felt responsiveness, and closeness (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2010).

Because of LSE's increased doubt, anxious attachment styles, heightened rejection sensitivity, and low estimation of how they are perceived by others, it is reasonable to predict that self-esteem is implicated in responses to relationship problems. We predicted that self-

esteem would be positively correlated with constructive approaches to problems and negatively correlated with defensive responses to conflict.

### **Compassionate and Self-Image Goals**

Goals can shape relationships and behavior over time (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Two distinct types of goals, compassionate and self-image goals, reflect ecosystem and egosystem perspectives of the relation of the self to others respectively (Crocker, Olivier, & Nuer, 2009).

People with compassionate goals want to be a supportive and constructive force in relationships because they care about the well-being of others in addition to themselves (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). They tend to see people as interconnected, regardless of group labels, communities, or generations (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). People high in compassionate goals tend to view their relationships with others as non-zero-sum, or in other words, they assume the success of one does not detract from that of others (Crocker & Canevello, 2008).

In relationships, people with high compassionate goals develop more supportive environments for themselves and others (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). They give more support to others and receive more support in return. They are also more responsive to their partners and perceive their partners as more responsive to their needs (Canevello & Crocker, 2010). Thus, by giving support and being responsive to others, people with high compassionate goals satisfy their need of belongingness and build close communal relationships (Crocker, Olivier, & Nuer, 2009).

People high in self-image goals want to construct, maintain, and defend desired images of themselves in order to project desirable social qualities, and be perceived by others as having desirable qualities (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). This strategic presentation, however, is not intended to deceive, but rather to idealize the conception of the self, as how people view themselves and how others view them are inextricably linked (Cooley, 1902/1956; Hardin &

Higgins, 1996; M. R. Leary & Downs, 1995; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985, as cited in Crocker & Canevello, 2008), and contribute to their need for belonging (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Those high in self-image goals tend to view their relationships as zero-sum, or view the gains of one partner in a relationship as coming at an expense of the other partner (Crocker & Canevello, 2008).

Self-image goals predict hostility and interpersonal conflict, making people high in self-image goals poor romantic partners (Moeller, Crocker, & Bushman, 2009). Self-image goals are associated with narcissism. Narcissists are preoccupied with maintaining their positive and over-the-top self-views; when these self-views and self-image goals are threatened, they respond with aggression, conflict, and hostility against those who insult or criticize them (Moeller, Crocker, & Bushman, 2009). Thus, self-image goals have many costs for relationships including conflict, self-consciousness and anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and mistrust (Crocker, Olivier, & Nuer, 2009).

Because individuals high in compassionate goals seek to be supportive and constructive forces in relationships, it is reasonable to predict that compassionate goals are implicated in responses to relationship problems such as constructive approaches to problems. Conversely, because those high in self-image goals wish to defend desired images of themselves and respond to threats with aggression, it is also reasonable to predict self-image goals will have effects on relationship problems such as defensive responses to conflict.

The present study examines the joint effects of self-esteem and interpersonal goals on relationships. Specifically, I test the hypothesis that self-esteem and interpersonal goals have unique effects on defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems. I also tested whether non-zero-sum beliefs could account for these associations. We explored three

main questions in analyses. First, we examined whether self-esteem and interpersonal goals explain unique variance in defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems. Second, we examined whether self-esteem and interpersonal goals explain unique variance in nonzero-sum beliefs about relationships. Finally, we tested the important distinction of whether nonzero-sum beliefs explain the effects self-esteem and interpersonal goals on defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were 110 heterosexual couples in which at least one individual currently was enrolled at The Ohio State University. Couples were recruited using flyers and through introductory psychology courses. Each individual of the couple was offered either course credit for participation in each phase or \$70 for completion of all four phases. \$25 was awarded to all participants in lab session Phase 2 from which data for this paper were taken. Twenty-seven couples dropped out of the study before scheduling the first in lab session leaving 83 couples that completed at least the first in lab session (Phase 2). The couples had been together between 19 days and 5.3 years ( $M=16.13$  months,  $SD=15.45$ ). The majority of participants reported their races as White or Caucasian (83.8%), 0.8% reported their race as Black or African American, 4.6% reported their race as Asian, and 10.7% 43 reported their race as multi-racial or other. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 27 years ( $M=19.55$ ,  $SD=1.68$ ).

### **Procedure**

The Relationship and Health Over Time Study consisted of four phases. Phase I was a 30 minute online survey that participants completed at their earliest convenience. All surveys in The Relationship and Health Over Time Study were administered via Qualtrics. After both



individuals of the romantic couple completed Phase I, they were sent an e-mail to schedule a time to come into the lab for Phase II. In Phase II, couples completed a two-hour lab session together. The lab session consisted of taking photographs of the participants, the participants attaching Firstbeat Bodyguard heart rate monitors to themselves, measuring a five minute baseline, collection of a saliva sample, collection of blood via a finger stick, and a 45-minute survey. After the first set of questionnaires, participants completed a 10 minute conflict discussion which was video recorded. Then participants filled out a 20-minute survey and we collected a second blood sample. The only data analyzed in this paper is from the first 45-minute questionnaire in Phase II. All other measures are not germane to this study.

## Measures

***Self-Esteem.*** Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965). The original 10-item scale was used, and included the items: “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others,” “I feel that I have a number of good qualities,” “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure,” (reversed) “I am able to do things as well as most other people,” “I feel I do not have much to be proud of,” (reversed) “I take a positive attitude toward myself,” “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself,” “I wish I could have more respect for myself,” (reversed) “I certainly feel useless at times,” (reversed) “At times I think I am no good at all,” (reversed). The scale had high internal consistency ( $\alpha=.82$ ).

***Compassionate goals*** were measured with a modified version the measure developed by Crocker et al. (2010, Study 2). Items began with the phrase “Over the past 2 weeks, in my romantic relationship, I wanted /tried to. . .” and included, “be supportive of my partner,” “have compassion for my partners’ mistakes and weaknesses,” “be constructive in my comments to my partner,” “avoid being selfish or self-centered,” “avoid neglecting my relationship with my

partner,” “avoid doing anything that would be harmful to my partner,” “be aware of the impact my behavior might have on my partner’s feelings,” and “make a positive difference in my partner’s life.” ( $\alpha = .82$ )

***Self-image goals*** were measured with 9 items, including “avoid showing my weaknesses,” “get my partner to acknowledge my positive qualities,” “avoid being blamed or criticized,” “avoid revealing my shortcomings or vulnerabilities,” “get my partner to respect or admire me,” “demonstrate my intelligence,” “demonstrate my positive qualities,” “avoid coming across as unintelligent or incompetent,” and avoid appearing unattractive, unlovable, or undesirable” ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

***Nonzero-sum beliefs about the romantic relationship*** were measured with a scale developed by Crocker and colleagues (Crocker, Canevello & Lewis, in preparation). Items began with the stem “Over the past 2 weeks in my romantic relationship I felt that:” Items included: “When a conflict occurs, it was possible for us to find a situation that was good for both of us,” “It was usually possible for both of us to get what we needed,” “What was good for one person is often bad for the other” (reversed), “It was possible for us to exist together in a way that made both of us happy, even if it wasn’t always immediately apparent how that could be done,” and “It was usually possible to resolve disagreements in mutually beneficial ways.” Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and had good reliability ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

***Constructive Approaches to Problems.*** Constructive approaches to interpersonal problems were measured using a scale developed by Canevello and Crocker (in preparation). The scale included six factors: Clarifying Misunderstandings, Identifying Root Causes, Feeling that Both People are Responsible for Improving Relationships, Listening, Viewing Problems as

Affecting the Relationship, and Talking About Problems and Difficulties. The scale had high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$ ). Items began with the stem “In my romantic relationship” and were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Clarifying Misunderstandings items included: “When I feel misunderstood, I try to clarify my meaning right away,” “When I feel hurt or angry about something someone did or said, I try to clarify what he or she was thinking,” “When someone says something that upsets me, I first try to understand what s/he really meant,” “I try to keep in mind that things that don’t bother me might bother others,” “When I feel misunderstood, I figure it’s best to just stop talking” (reversed), and “When I feel hurt or angry about something someone did or said, I point out his or her mistake.”

Identifying Root Causes items included: “When a problem comes up with someone else, we discuss why that might be happening,” and “When someone has an issue with me, I try to explore what’s going on that makes it an issue.” Feeling that Both People are Responsible for Improving Relationships items included: “It is up to both people to make relationships work well,” and, “When a relationship isn’t going well, we are both responsible for improving it.”

Listening items included: “I find if I really listen to what someone is saying, I can understand her/his issues or concerns,” “When someone raises an issue or concern about me, I first try to listen without saying anything,” “When other people talk, I’m usually thinking about how I will respond before they are finished speaking,” and, “When someone raises an issue or concern about me, I first explain why it’s not really a problem” (reversed).

Viewing Problems as Affecting Relationships items included: “When problems come up, if they’re not addressed it affects the relationship,” “When someone has an issue or problem with me, then it’s an issue for us both,” “If someone has a problem or issue with me, it’s their problem, not mine” (reversed), and, “When a relationship with someone isn’t going well, usually I have contributed to the

problem in some way.” Talking About Problems and Difficulties in Relationships items included: “If I have a problem with someone, I prefer to discuss it with them right away so the problem does not get worse,” “When I have a problem with someone, I am reluctant to discuss it with them because I don’t want to create conflict” (reversed), “When I have issues with someone, I find the best approach is not discuss it and see if it goes away” (reversed), “When a problem comes up, I discuss it promptly,” “When there is a problem in a relationship, I try to fix it as soon as possible,” “If I have an issue or problem with someone, I try to just get over it” (reversed), “When someone raises a concern about her/his relationship with me, I quickly suggest a solution,” and, “I usually do not confront minor interpersonal problems, because they can easily get blown out of proportion” (reversed).

***Defensive Responses to Conflict.*** Defensive responses to conflict were measured using the 12-item understanding and defensive responses to conflict scale developed by Knee et al. (2005). The defensive responses subscale included six items. Items began with the stem, “Looking back on this disagreement or misunderstanding, to what extent did it lead you to:” and were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Items included: “Feel detached or distant from your partner,” “Pretend to agree with your partner,” “Question the future of your relationship with your partner,” “Want to yell or shout,” “Want to stop talking to your partner,” “Want to leave or walk away.” ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

## **Results**

Data analyses were conducted in four phases: examining whether self-esteem and interpersonal goals explain unique variance in defensive responses to conflict, whether self-esteem and interpersonal goals explain unique variance in constructive approaches to problems and difficulties, whether self-esteem and interpersonal goals explain unique variance in nonzero-

sum beliefs about the relationship, and finally, whether nonzero-sum beliefs explain the effects self-esteem and interpersonal goals on defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems. The non-independence of individuals within dyads was controlled in all analyses using the MIXED command in SPSS. All analysis controlled for gender and socially desirable responding.

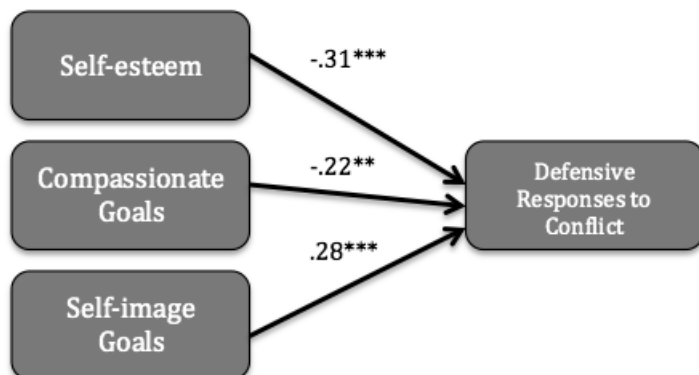
Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities and correlations of self-esteem, compassionate goals, self-image goals, nonzero-sum beliefs, defensive responses to conflict, and constructive approaches to problems. Self-esteem was positively correlated with compassionate goals, nonzero-sum beliefs, and constructive approaches to problems, and negatively correlated with defensive responses to conflict. Compassionate goals were positively correlated with nonzero-sum beliefs and constructive approaches to problems, and negatively correlated with defensive responses to conflict. Self-image goals were positively correlated with defensive responses to conflict and negatively correlated with nonzero-sum beliefs and constructive approaches to problems. Finally, nonzero-sum beliefs were positively correlated with constructive responses to problems and negatively correlated with defensive responses to conflict.

*Table 1. Means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities and correlations of self-esteem, compassionate goals, self-image goals, nonzero-sum beliefs, defensive responses to conflict, and constructive approaches to problems.*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Scale Reliabilities	Correlations					
				Self-Esteem	Compassionate Goals	Self-Image Goals	NonZero-Sum Beliefs	Defensive Responses to Conflict	Constructive Approaches to Problems
Self-Esteem	4.0097	0.79259	.82	1	.262**	.106	.282**	-.317**	.242**
Compassionate Goals	4.188	0.50693	.82	.262**	1	.193*	.425**	-.262**	.424**
Self-Image Goals	3.0147	0.6669	.84	.106	.193*	1	-.238**	.260**	-.171*
NonZero-Sum Beliefs	4.2253	0.57743	.84	.282**	.425**	-.238**	1	-.575**	.687**
Defensive Responses to Conflict	1.7512	0.71021	.85	-.317**	-.262**	-.260**	-.575**	1	-.453**
Constructive Approaches to Problems	3.6843	0.33872	.77	.242**	.424**	-.171	.687**	-.453**	1

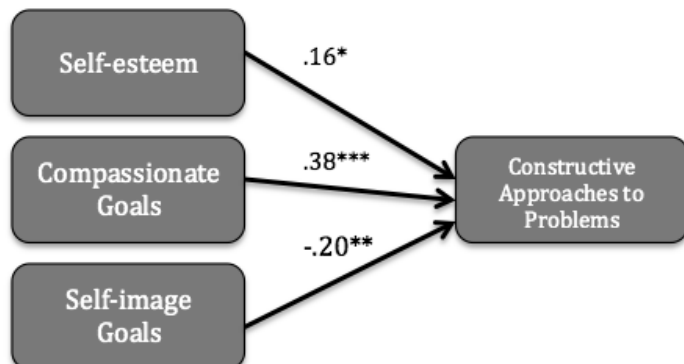
**Self-esteem, interpersonal goals, and defensive responses to conflict.** As expected, self-esteem predicted less defensive responses to conflict, even with goals controlled  $t(156.930) = -4.058$ . Self-esteem, compassionate goals,  $t(143.204) = -2.727$ , and self-image goals,  $t(155.629) = -3.606$ , each explain unique variance in defensive responses to conflict. The partial correlations for this analysis are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Associations of self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals with defensive responses to conflict. All estimates are partial correlations. \*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*= $p < .001$ .



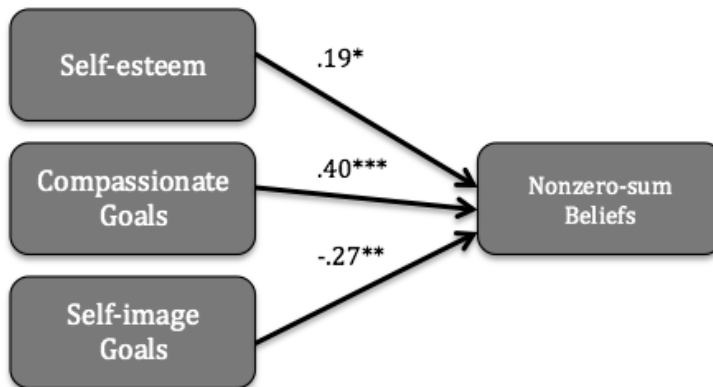
**Self-esteem, interpersonal goals, and constructive approaches to problems.** Self-esteem predicted more constructive approaches to problems, even when goals were controlled,  $t(157.998) = 2.051$ . Self-esteem, compassionate goals,  $t(148.388) = 5.106$ , and self-image goals,  $t(157.706) = -2.605$ , all predict unique variance in constructive approaches to problems. The partial correlations for this analysis are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Associations of self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals with constructive approaches to problems. All estimates are partial correlations. \*= $p < .05$ , \*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*= $p < .001$ .



**Self-esteem, interpersonal goals, and zero-sum beliefs.** Self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals all predict unique variance in nonzero-sum beliefs. Self-esteem predicts more nonzero-sum beliefs, even when goals are controlled,  $t(157.573) = 2.396$ . Compassionate goals predict more nonzero-sum beliefs,  $t(151.907) = 5.431$ , and self-image goals predict less nonzero-sum beliefs,  $t(157.967) = -3.536$ . The partial correlations for this analysis are shown in Figure 3.

*Figure 3. Associations of self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals with nonzero-sum beliefs. All estimates are partial correlations.  $*=p < .05$ ,  $**=p < .01$ ,  $***=p < .001$ .*



### **Nonzero-sum beliefs as explanation for effects of self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals on defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems.**

Self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals each have indirect effects on constructive approaches to problems through nonzero-sum beliefs. Nonzero-sum beliefs,  $t(155.365) = 8.374$ , explain the effects of self-esteem,  $t(154.883) = 1.010$ , and self-image goals  $t(153.803) = -.790$ , on constructive approaches to problems. Nonzero-sum beliefs partly explain the effects of compassionate goals on constructive approaches to problems, but compassionate goals still have a significant direct effect ( $t = 2.230$ ;  $df = 132.160$ ). The path model and partial



correlations for this analysis are shown in Figure 5.

Self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals each had unique indirect effects on defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems through nonzero-sum beliefs, as well as unique direct effects. Nonzero-sum beliefs,  $t(156.951) = -5.308$ , partially accounted for the effects of self-esteem,  $t(156.993) = -3.159$ , compassionate goals,  $t(146.515) = -.727$ , and self-image goals ( $t(156.829) = 2.388$ ) on defensive responses to conflict. The path model and partial correlations for this analysis are shown in Figure 4.

*Figure 4: Path model testing associations of self-esteem and interpersonal goals on defensive responses to conflict through non-zero sum beliefs. Coefficients are partial correlations. Partial correlations in parenthesis are the effects from previous analyses that do not control for nonzero-sum beliefs. \*= $p < .05$ , \*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*= $p < .001$ .*

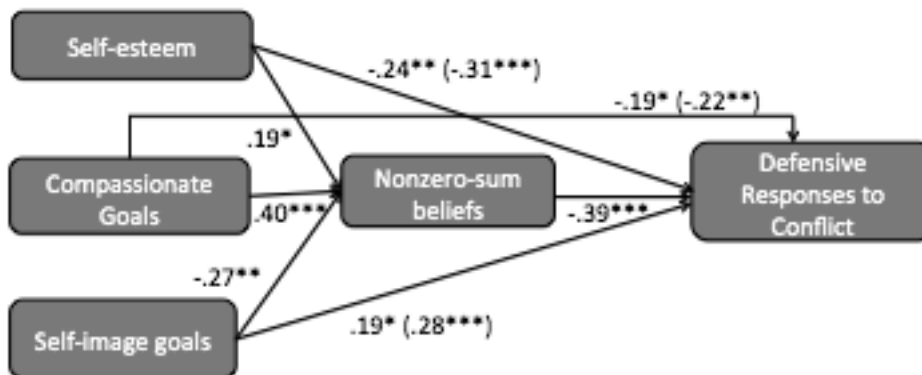
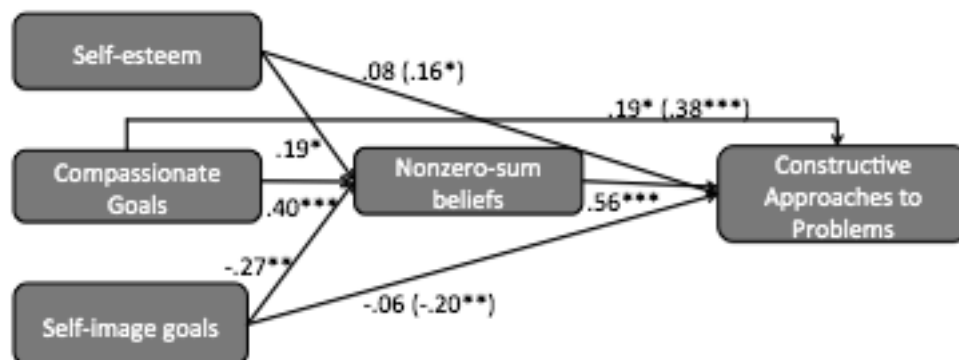


Figure 5: Path model testing associations of self-esteem and interpersonal goals on constructive approaches to problems through non-zero sum beliefs. Coefficients are partial correlations. Partial correlations in parenthesis are the effects from previous analyses that do not control for nonzero-sum beliefs.  $*=p < .05$ ,  $**=p < .01$ ;  $***=p < .001$ .



## Discussion

In sum, self-esteem, compassionate goals and self-image goals each predict responses to difficulty in romantic relationships. There is growing literature on how self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals each affect relationships, and there has been some evidence that they are related. This study asked the question of whether these three variables were separate or the same phenomenon acting on defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems. It is one of the first of its kind to provide evidence that the effects of self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals are not explained by one another. We found each has unique direct effects on both defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems.

Consistent with my hypothesis, lower levels of self-esteem predicted more defensive responses to conflict, and higher levels of self-esteem predicted more constructive approaches to problems. As expected, compassionate goals were positively correlated with more constructive approaches to problems and negatively correlated with defensive responses to conflict. Self-

image goals were negatively correlated with constructive approaches to problems and positively correlated with more defensive responses to conflict.

We then wanted to see whether nonzero-sum beliefs accounted for some of these associations. The effects of all three variables on defensive responses to conflict were partially explained by nonzero-sum beliefs. Each has unique direct effects on both defensive responses to conflict and constructive approaches to problems through nonzero-sum beliefs as well as unique indirect effects on defensive responses and constructive approaches that are not explained by nonzero-sum beliefs. The effects of self-esteem and self-image goals on constructive approaches to problems were almost completely explained by nonzero-sum beliefs. Higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of self-image goals did not predict more constructive approaches to conflict when nonzero-sum beliefs were controlled. The effect of compassionate goals on constructive approaches to problems was partially explained by nonzero-sum beliefs, but compassionate goals did maintain a direct effect on constructive approaches to problems even when nonzero-sum beliefs were controlled.

An important finding is the strong positive correlation between nonzero-sum beliefs and constructive approaches to problems and the strong negative correlation between nonzero-sum beliefs and defensive responses to conflict. This suggests that people tend to be more constructive in their responses to conflict if they believe that their relationship works in non-zero sum ways. Or, in other words, if someone believes that his or her partner's success does not come at the expense of his or her own, or if he or she believes a situation exists where both partners can be satisfied, he or she will be more likely to constructively approach problems and less likely to respond defensively to conflict. This could suggest a point of intervention, as it is possible that nonzero-sum beliefs have the potential to be taught or cultivated in individuals. If

individuals could increase their nonzero-sum beliefs, they could potentially have more successful relationships. Thus, this research could have implications for conflict management, marital counseling, and other areas.

Yet, nonzero-sum beliefs account for only some of the effects of self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals on constructive approaches to problems and defensive responses to conflict. While focusing on nonzero-sum beliefs could have a clear benefit, one would still have residual unique effects of self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals on defensive responses to conflict, and residual unique effects of compassionate goals on constructive approaches to problems. Thus, it is imperative that relationship researchers focus on each of these variables in further research.

Further questions remain about whether these results would be replicated in platonic relationships. Yet, we see no reason to believe that differences would be found in these relationships or other relationships. Another possible limitation of the study is the self-selected pool of participants. The average length of participant relationships was unexpectedly high (16.13 months), and we predict that couples who were engaged in longer-term, more stable and satisfying relationships were more likely to volunteer for a study that would require scrutiny of their relationship. Further research should examine whether these results are replicated in shorter-term relationships as well.

The growing body of research on self-esteem and relationship goals has contributed greatly to the understanding of relationships. This study provides evidence that self-esteem, compassionate goals, and self-image goals each explain unique variance in constructive approaches to problems as well as defensive responses to conflict and that nonzero-sum beliefs partially account for these effects.

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